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SUBJECT: FORMERPRESIDENTS PESSIMISTIC ON THE FUTURE UNDER
BERISA

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN L. WITHERS II FR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d)
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¶1. (C) Summary: uri(ng a February 3 lunch with Ambassador, formerPPresidents Alfred Moisiu and Rexhep Mehdani delivee d a very pessimistic view of Albania's politica future. Both warned strongly that Albania is headed in the wrong direction and declared that PM e risha will do "anything" to stay in power, including "fixing" the June parliamentary elections. They described the lustration law as a blatant attack on the judiciary and maintained that its effects are already being felt. In this environment, they said the opposition should have a good opportunity to win the upcoming elections, but internal divisions threaten chances of an outright victory. Given the prominence and esteem with which Moisiu and Mehdani are held, (both are seen as non-partisan senior statesmen) their pessimism does not bode well for the coming year. End summary.

¶2. (C) On February 3, Ambassador hosted former Presidents Alfred Moisiu and Rexhep Mehdani for a very frank and open discussion on the status of Albanian politics. The two conveyed feelings of alarm and urgency about the current political environment and believe strongly that Albania is heading on a "dangerous" course. Moisiu in particular said that he feels PM Sali Berisha is repeating many of the mistakes he committed in the past and said Berisha will do "anything," including electoral fraud, to stay in power. At one point Moisiu said that PM Berisha is worse than former PM Fatos Nano in tolerating corruption among his family members and within his inner government circle. (Comment: Nano, four times the PM, is rumored to be the most corrupt figure in Albanian politics. End comment.)

LUSTRATION LAW BEGINNING TO HAVE AN EFFECT

¶3. (C) Regarding the lustration law, both see it as an attack on the judiciary and Moisiu said that it is already having an effect. He said judges are intimidated and it is likely that judges will avoid making any rulings that would displease Berisha in the high profile cases concerning Gerdec, Fazlic, and the Durres-Kukes road construction. He was particularly concerned that the Constitutional Court, which will render a ruling on the lustration law in the coming days, may feel sufficiently threatened to tailor its ruling in Berisha's favor. He added that recent lower court rulings favoring FM Basha in the Durres-Kukes case made no sense legally and on the contrary, showed the courts caving in to the PM's pressure.

DIVISIONS IN OPPOSITION COULD SEAL BERISHA'S VICTORY

¶4. (C) Both former Presidents offered that the opposition could win the upcoming elections if it were united. However, the opposition's internal divisions threaten to derail its chances at victory. They also noted that the ruling party has divisions too and Moisiu pointed out that many in the

Democratic Party are upset with what he termed "Berisha's family government." They both thought the economy could play a very large role in the upcoming elections, with Mehdani saying that the economy could stumble over the next few months thus handing the disorganized opposition an opportunity to win the elections, assuming it resolved its differences. That said, although both implied that opposition leader Edi Rama is a preferable alternative to Berisha, they believe that he is untested, particularly on the international stage.

15. (C) Finally, the two urged the U.S. to take an active role in speaking out against Berisha's democratic backsliding. Moisiu was very passionate on this theme and said he regards the democratic backsliding as an international issue because, in his view, without a stable, democratic Albania, regional security could be endangered.

16. (C) Comment: Moisiu and Mehdani are elder statesmen of Albanian politics and are considered to be as non-partisan as one could be here. Both are widely respected and they continue to play a stabilizing role in the political scene. Given their stature, it was telling to hear these overwhelmingly pessimistic views and surprising how strongly they feel that Albania is heading down the wrong path in terms of judicial independence and democratic pluralism. Both were in agreement on nearly all the issues, and were very animated and passionate as they gave their opinions and analysis. Such pessimism from men of such standing does not seem to bode well for the coming year.

WITHERS